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The Interview

Pam Morse

It was a typical waiting room, with gold commercial carpet, black naugahyde furniture, two huge split-leg philodendrons, gold and green drapes and several floral paintings enclosed in varnished wooden frames. The secretary sat behind a formidable desk pecking at an IBM typewriter. She was typical too; lots of hair, "arranged," a bit too much jewelry, and an overwhelming amount of perfume. Ambush, I think—or Estee Lauder.

She kept very busy and I thought, she's forgotten I'm here and he's forgotten, and I am growing to this chair. I looked at the calendar on her desk; it had a sketch of a pigtailed little girl on a dilapidated bicycle. I fingered my own hair, stylishly short now, but remembered a time when I too had worn long beribboned pigtails.

As these thoughts of pigtails and girlhood ran through my mind, the secretary swiveled towards me, gave a courteous smile, and said, "I'm sorry you've had to wait. I'm sure Mr. Phillips will see you very soon."

"Oh, that's okay," I politely responded. But I thought, I have been here over an hour, I haven't had lunch. I hate your ugly curtains, and if I don't find out immediately whether or not I've got this job, I will die; right here in your dumb black naugahyde chair.

I began to fidget, crossing and recrossing my legs, and playing with my empty gold locket. I peeled off my fingernail polish. There I was, trying to make a good impression and I had only nine sugared bronze nails instead of ten. I read the print on the desk calendar,

and noticing once more its illustration, the pigtailed girl on the bicycle. I remembered my own pigtails, flapping behind me as I rode my brother's dilapidated bicycle—when I was only five.

Learning to ride hadn't been easy, even though I had a whole staff of instructors, since I was the youngest kid on the block. Bucky, my older brother, was my favorite teacher, maybe because I knew that he could ride all the way around the block "no-handed," or maybe just because he was Bucky.

Every day, that August before I started first grade, Bucky pushed me up and down the driveway, with one firm hand on the back of the seat and one on the rear fender. When the driveway got old, he pushed me into the street or even around the whole block.

"Good, now pedal harder . . . keep your feet on the pedals," he advised, panting slightly from having to run beside me.

"Am I doing good? Can we go faster?" I laughed excitedly, confident that I was the best bike rider in the neighborhood.

"Don't hit those holes."

"I won't," as I wobbled by them.

Anytime he suggested that I try it alone or without both of his hands on the bike I felt strangely shaky and pleaded "Not yet. Just take me around the block one more time."

And my brother, maybe because he liked being depended on, or maybe because he wanted to be good to me, or maybe because Mom warned him not to let me get hurt, pushed me around again.

I always insisted on riding his bike. It was way too big for me, and rusted and muddy, but to me it was a "big kid's bike" and being able to ride it was like getting to open a Christmas present a day early. That rusty bike with several missing spokes was magnificent to me, and my own shiny blue one with the colored streamers fluttering behind the handlebars was a disgrace because it was the smallest size and only for "babies."

Early one Sunday (somehow we had gotten out of going to Sunday School) I begged once more to be

"pushed." Bucky took me once or twice around the block and I felt extremely proud because I was on the "big kid's bike," and because it was Sunday and I hadn't gone to church. He was having fun too: we laughed a lot, and he seemed to feel very important being a teacher.

So we kept riding, around the block, up and down the sidewalk, and on to the dead end street. Then, on the longest straight stretch of road, I sailed down the street, giggling, right past our own driveway and turned to tell Bucky to push faster.

He wasn't beside me; no steady hands were holding onto the fender, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Bucky, way back at the corner, standing against the yield sign. He was grinning, with his arms crossed over his chest, thrilled that under his guidance, I had learned to ride by myself. The moment I saw him half a block away, I realized that I was on my own.

I don't remember losing control, or falling, or hitting the black pavement. I only remember being sprawled out in the street with my arms behind, supporting me. Both of my hands were skinned, and my knee was bleeding. I had torn my red checked shorts, and the street was so hot that the tar, in places, had become soft and sticky. I felt no pain just then, only terribly afraid and alone. The first pain I felt was that of a shaken faith and lost confidence. So I sat, tears welling up in my eyes, hearing the gentle whirring sound of the still spinning bicycle wheel that occasionally reflected the August sunlight from a not yet rusted spoke. A yellow ribbon from one of my pigtails dangled from the handlebars, and as I reached for it I clutched it in my hand.

Bucky ran to me, scared, biting his bottom lip hard, like he still does when he's worried. He helped me stand and led me home, leaving the dilapidated bicycle on its side in the middle of the street.

"You're okay. Now don't cry. Come on now, you're all right. Just a few scratches. Don't cry any more."

I wouldn't speak to him at all, I only sobbed. It wasn't because I was hurt so much as because I had been on my own and hadn't made it.

I don't remember much after that, but I know that before long I was back on the bike, being "pushed" and then riding alone. Later I learned to race and to ride "no-handed." I fell many times but it never hurt, not like that first time.

The loud buzzzz of the intercom reminded me that I wasn't five, I was twenty-two and had to make a good impression. The secretary muttered something into the intercom, hung up the receiver and spoke to me. "Mr. Phillips will see you now."

I smiled at her, calm somehow, and walked into the office. As I turned to close the heavy door, I could see Bucky, only ten, with his arms crossed over his chest, grinning and leaning against a yield sign. I drew in an extra breath, closed the door and smiled.

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